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Soviet Activism on Regional Issues

Summary

The Soviets have made several diplomatic moves over the last 18 months to reassert themselves as an important player on Third World conflict and settlement issues. Initially, much of the Soviet effort appeared designed to counter what Moscow perceived as a growing US challenge in the Third World and an American attempt to seize the initiative in the international arena on regional issues. More recently, the Soviets may have sought to take advantage of what they see as an impasse in US policy resulting from the Iran-Contra affair. Objectives of Moscow's activism on regional issues include denying the United States exclusive "use" of the regional conflict issue in international forums, building an improved Soviet image on regional settlements and using it to promote better ties with pro-Western Third World states, securing Soviet involvement in any regional negotiations that may emerge, and building domestic pressure in the West against military intervention in the Third World. 25X1

To date the Kremlin has not shown any official signs of willingness to change its substantive positions on regional issues. Even in the absence of such change, Moscow's activism could enable it to make gains toward these objectives if it succeeds in convincing Third World and Western audiences of Soviet sincerity in seeking settlements to regional conflicts. 25X1

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So far, most Third World audiences are waiting to see what substance may emerge from the Kremlin's entreaties. They are also waiting for the US policy response, which will be a critical, perhaps decisive variable in determining how successful the Soviet campaign on regional issues will be. Wide ranging debate in the Soviet academic literature suggests that there is official sanction for exploring new ideas on Third World issues, and that the possibility of some change in the substance of Soviet policy on regional issues should not be ruled out. []

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Soviet Activism on Regional Issues

Moves Moscow has made on regional issues include:

- o Heightening the visibility of diplomatic and propaganda efforts to associate the USSR with established regional settlement processes and ideas such as UN-sponsored activity on the Gulf War and Contadora.
- o Reviving calls for new regional negotiating forums, such as the vaguely defined Asian Security Conference, or putting new twists on old ideas, as in its proposals for a preparatory conference on the Middle East peace process.
- o Intensifying efforts to demonstrate its flexibility on the terms for a negotiated settlement of the Afghan war.
- o Attempting to improve ties to a wider range of Third World states involved in or affected by regional disputes, including Israel and several pro-Western states in Southeast Asia and Latin America.
- o Putting forward proposals for an "international security system" that would include, among other political, economic, and military components, some as yet vaguely defined processes and mechanisms for dealing with regional conflicts. Gorbachev described this concept for a broad audience in his speech to the recent Moscow "International Forum for a Nuclear-Free World."
- o Emphasizing in Soviet propaganda the contrast between the USSR's supposed peaceful intent and the Reagan administration's alleged aggressive policies in the Third World.

In addition, Moscow has shown continued willingness to engage the United States in bilateral discussions on regional issues, which it seems to see as a means to probe US thinking, bolster its claim that it is a superpower entitled to a role in regional settlement issues, and enhance the credibility of its assertions that the USSR favors negotiated settlements to regional conflicts.

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The Context of Moscow's Moves

US Challenge in the Third World. By 1985, the Soviets had become concerned with renewed US military and political activism in the Third World, or, as they put it, "US neoglobalism." A wide variety of Soviet academic, journalistic, and political writings described an aggressive US effort to promote its interests throughout the Third World--by implication at Soviet expense--using a full range of military, economic, political, and intelligence instruments. Specific developments that probably contributed to Moscow's perception include what the Soviets likely saw as a US attempt in 1984 and 1985 to seize the political initiative on regional issues in the international arena and to complicate arms control negotiations by insisting on direct linkage between regional settlements and arms control. This was exemplified for Moscow by President Reagan's 1985 address to the United Nations General Assembly, which highlighted US interest in regional conflict issues on the eve of the Geneva meeting with Gorbachev. Also, the past few years saw increased US willingness to back militarily anti-Soviet forces in Nicaragua and Angola, continued support for the resistance in Afghanistan, and US use of military force in Libya and Grenada. []

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While the neoglobalism concept--which surfaced in the Soviet media in late 1985--was a useful propaganda theme, the extended discussion of the concept in a variety of vehicles suggests that its emergence also reflected genuine Soviet concern over the implications of US policy in the Third World for the USSR. Soviet activism on regional issues over the last year and a half probably was designed in part as a response to this perceived US challenge in the Third World. []

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Moscow's activism on regional issues probably is also aimed at exploiting US foreign policy difficulties in the wake of the Iran-Contra affair. While Soviet writings indicate that the ultimate effect of the affair on US policy is a subject of considerable debate among Soviet analysts, the Kremlin appears to see the problem as having created opportunities for Soviet image building at US expense, especially in the Middle East. []

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The Local Dimension. Several elements of the Soviet campaign on regional issues represent initiatives on and responses to specific local and regional circumstances, rather than policies aimed exclusively, or even primarily, at affecting East-West competition. Soviet interest in obtaining economic benefits from relations with relatively well-off countries such as Singapore and other ASEAN states, Argentina, Brazil, and Kuwait has played a strong part

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in shaping Moscow's moves on regional issues. Also, the USSR has expanded its activity in areas where it perceives that political developments have opened new opportunities for increased Soviet influence, developments such as democratization in South America and the efforts of the South Pacific island states to diversify their economic and political relations. However, the broad geographic scope of the Kremlin's activism on regional issues and the emergence of some common patterns in the Soviet approach to the various areas suggests that more is involved in this activism than a series of discrete responses to local and regional circumstances. [redacted]

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Soviet Objectives

The objectives of Moscow's new activism on regional issues include:

- o Denying Washington the ability to use regional conflicts to its advantage in the international arena by portraying itself as the sole superpower interested in settling these conflicts.
- o Using an improved Soviet image on regional conflict and settlement issues to promote better economic and political ties with countries suspicious of the intentions of the USSR and its allies in a given region. For example, Kremlin success in convincing ASEAN states of its interest in a Cambodia settlement could reduce some of the longstanding political obstacles that have limited trade and bilateral relations between the USSR and these countries.
- o Securing Soviet involvement in any regional negotiations that may emerge. Moscow strongly resented US and Western attempts to isolate the USSR from past negotiations on the Middle East, Zimbabwe, and Namibia.
- o Building domestic political pressure in the West against military intervention in Third World conflicts by convincing Western audiences of the sincerity of Soviet interest in East-West cooperation in negotiated settlements to regional disputes. [redacted]

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As Yet No Change in Substance

To date the Kremlin has expressed general interest in negotiated settlements of several regional disputes, tried to highlight its own flexibility, especially on Afghanistan, and put forward sketchy proposals for some wider negotiating forums. However, the USSR has not shown any official signs of willingness to modify substantively its underlying positions on any of the regional disputes and has reiterated its support for its allies in these conflicts on numerous occasions. This overall pattern--change in style and image running well ahead of as yet relatively limited or even nonexistent change in policy substance--parallels many other aspects of Soviet policy under Gorbachev. [redacted]

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There is also no indication that the USSR will make concessions on regional issues to promote its arms control objectives. While the Soviets have acknowledged the importance of regional issues and the fact that they do have an impact on wider questions of East-West security, a variety of Soviet writings suggest that Moscow continues to view progress on superpower disarmament as a prerequisite for, rather than a consequence of, effective settlement of regional issues. []

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Implications for the United States

The Soviet regional issues campaign raises potential problems for the United States even in the absence of change in substance. For example, any Soviet success in convincing international audiences of Moscow's sincerity in promoting settlements to regional conflicts could open the way for improved relations between the USSR and pro-Western Third World states and potentially complicate these countries' relations with the United States. Such success could contribute to Third World, West European, and American domestic opposition to US military moves in the Third World in support of anti-Communist insurgents. Also, Moscow may be able to increase its ability to act as a "spoiler" on a wider variety of regional issues, cutting off Western options for promoting settlements solely under Western auspices. Finally, lack of effective US response to such developments over the long run could put Moscow in a position to assume the initiative in various regional settlement processes if our Third World allies lose patience with and faith in the United States.

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It is difficult to predict at this point the extent to which Soviet activism on regional issues will lead to serious negative consequences for the United States--the US policy response is a critical, perhaps decisive variable in such a calculation. So far, most Third World audiences seem to have taken a wait-and-see attitude toward Moscow's entreaties on regional issues, presumably waiting for the "beef" behind the Soviet proposals. Indeed, if the propaganda and posturing aspects of its regional issues campaign continue to run so far ahead of the substantive ones, the USSR runs some risk of damaging its already less than solid credibility as a regional peacemaker in the eyes of many Third World states. The Kremlin presumably judges, however, that the prospective short- and medium-term payoffs of the campaign outweigh the potential long-run damage to its credibility. []

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Potential Changes in the Wind?

Regional conflict is one of the issues about which General Secretary Gorbachev has called for "new thinking" on the part of both East and West. According to Gorbachev, this thinking must take into account the realities of the nuclear era, during which Third World conflicts "assume dangerous proportions, involving more and more countries as their interests are affected directly or indirectly." This makes "settlement of regional conflicts...a dictate of our time." []

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As previously noted, little has emerged at an official level to suggest what substantive, as opposed to procedural and cosmetic, change the USSR might be willing to undertake to promote progress toward settlements. However, there are signs that there is official authorization for exploring in academic forums a variety of ideas relating to regional issues, many of which could have potential implications for Moscow's policy in the Third World. For example, US participants in unofficial talks with high-ranking Soviet academic specialists on the Third World have found the Soviets interested in discussing questions of national reconciliation and possible future political arrangements in Afghanistan. Moreover, there has been an extensive ongoing debate in the Soviet academic literature on questions such as the costs of supporting Marxist-Leninist client states, the benefits to be gained from better economic relations with the newly industrializing Third World countries, the outlook for "armed struggle" as an agent of change in the Third World, and the place that various regional settlement arrangements might have in the Soviets' proposed "international security system." [REDACTED]

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This ferment in the academic sphere cannot be read as an accurate indicator of specific directions that Soviet policy on regional issues might take--the spectrum of debate is too wide and the relationship of academicians to policymakers too problematic to allow for reliable predictions on specific policy issues. It does suggest, however, that no firm line exists on many of these issues, that Soviet policymakers are indeed looking to their specialists for new concepts and ideas on the Third World, and that substantive change in Moscow's regional policies may be something with which the United States will have to deal over the next few years. [REDACTED]

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Scorecard of Soviet Moves on Regional Issues

East Asia and Pacific

- o 1985-86 - Moscow tempers statements on ASEAN, acknowledging it as a legitimate political organization rather than a tool of US imperialism.
 - o May 1985 - Gorbachev calls for an Asian Collective Security Conference.
 - o April 1986 - Soviet government statement proposes expansion of economic, scientific, and technical cooperation among Asian and Pacific countries, claiming that this would create preconditions for an "all-Asian forum" to resolve "contentious issues."
 - o July 1986 - Gorbachev, in a speech in Vladivostok, revives earlier calls for an Asian collective security conference, announces partial withdrawals of Soviet troops from Mongolia and Afghanistan, and makes conciliatory gestures toward China.
 - o December 1986 - The Soviets sign the protocols to the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty--with a loophole on future observance--and propagandize on US refusal to adhere to the treaty.
 - o January 1987 - Soviet diplomats [] express Soviet interest in holding a regular dialogue with ASEAN on economic and political issues. []
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Afghanistan

- o 1986 - Soviets make a series of gestures intended to demonstrate their interest in an Afghan settlement and their flexibility. These gestures include Soviet willingness to see non-PDPA members in an Afghan government, the dropping of Kabul's demand for direct negotiations with the Pakistanis at Geneva, discussion of a timetable for Soviet withdrawal, and the announcement the supposed withdrawal of six Soviet regiments from Afghanistan. Moscow plays up each move in lobbying for support of its Afghan policy, especially among Third World nations and international organizations.
 - o December 1986 - Soviets propose an Afghan cease-fire to take effect in January 1987 and offer a "national reconciliation program" that opened the possibility of bringing resistance leaders into a coalition with the present regime. []
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South Asia

- o November 1986 - Gorbachev and Indian Prime Minister Gandhi issue the Delhi Declaration as the centerpiece of the General Secretary's visit to Delhi, calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons and the adoption of peaceful coexistence of states with different social and political systems as the norm of international relations. Soviet commentators later state that the Delhi Declaration can serve as a model for Soviet relations with other non-socialist Third World countries.
- o January-February 1987 - Soviets publicly suggest that they acted as peacemakers during the Indo-Pakistani border crisis. Moscow may indeed have acted to defuse tensions during the confrontation. []

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Middle East

- o March 1986 - Gorbachev proposes that both the United States and the USSR simultaneously remove their fleets from the Mediterranean. The proposal followed US strikes on Libyan air defense systems.
- o July 1986 - Gorbachev proposes that a "preparatory committee"--to include the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and, possibly, other states--meet to pave the way for an international conference on the Arab-Israeli dispute. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze formally proposes the preparatory committee idea before the United Nations General Assembly in September.
- o August 1986 - Soviet and Israeli officials hold an unprecedented meeting in Helsinki to discuss bilateral consular issues. Though the meeting broke down quickly, the two sides have continued to pursue non-official contacts.
- o January 1987 - Moscow issues official statements on both the Arab-Israeli peace process and the Iran-Iraq war proclaiming Soviet interest in promoting a political solution to the conflicts. Neither statement offers new concepts or policies. []

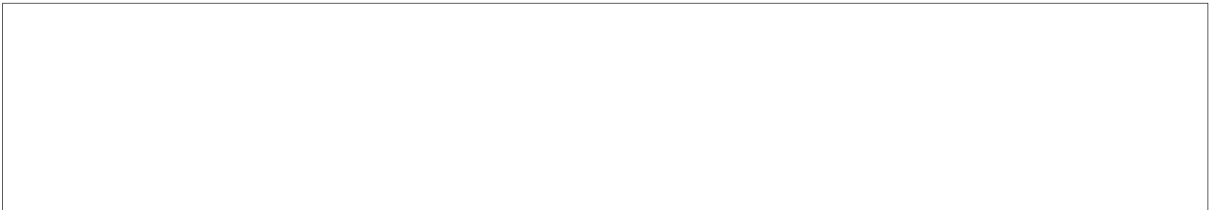
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Latin America


- o May 1986 - Soviets make first attempt in several years to open diplomatic and economic relations with Guatemala.
- o November 1986 - Soviet government statement accuses the United States of preparing for direct military intervention in Nicaragua and reaffirms Soviet solidarity with the Contadora process. Moscow makes a simultaneous demarche to the United States proposing bilateral talks on

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the region within the existing framework of senior regional experts talks.



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o January 1987 - Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze meets with Latin American diplomats representing the Contadora Group and Support Group countries, praising Contadora, UN, and OAS peacemaking activities. He emphasized Soviet willingness to "facilitate the relaxation of tensions in Central America." 

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